

Evelyn J. Steward

# The Blood Red ruby

Science Fiction

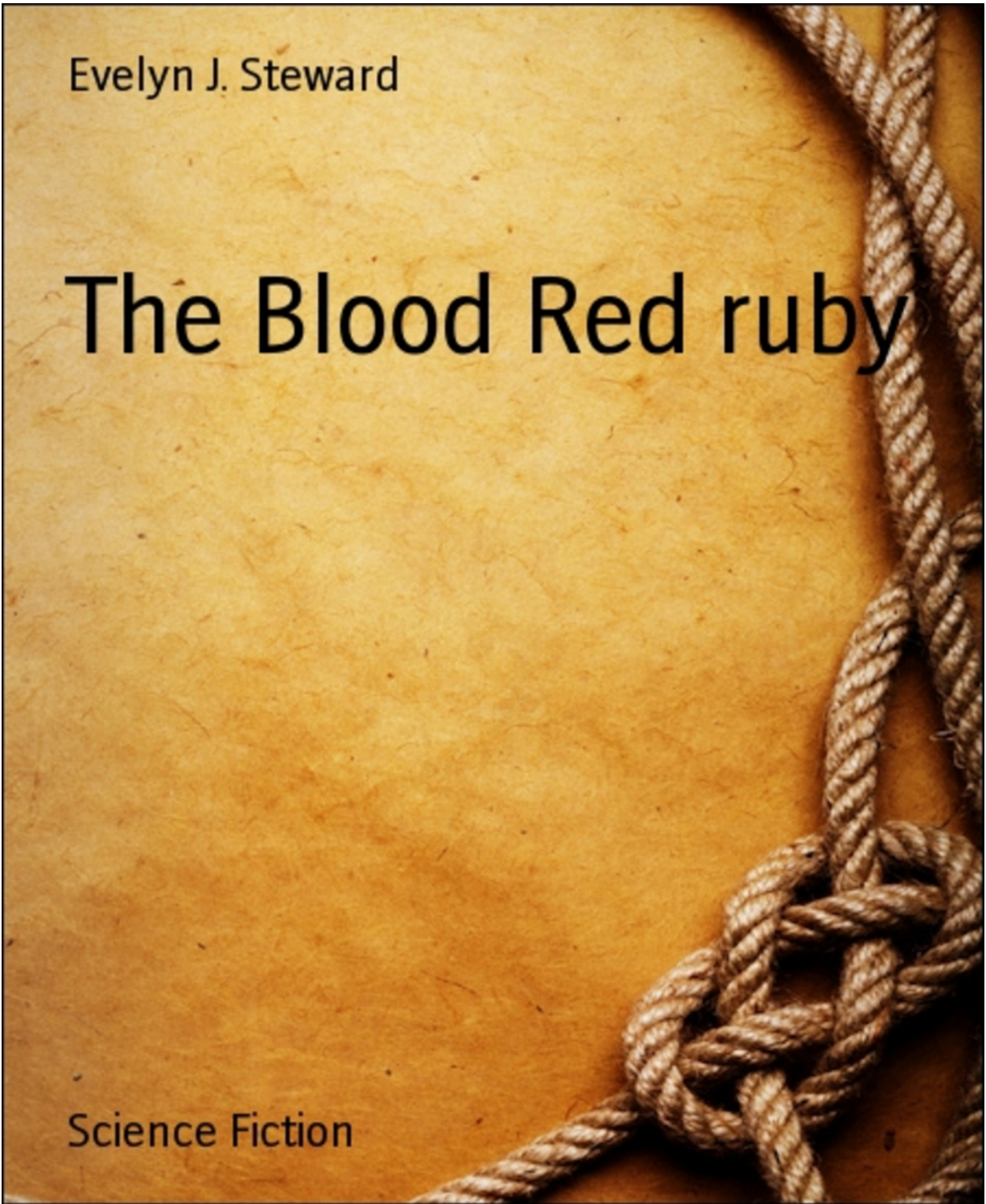




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"We're breaking through!" shouted Henry Jackson to the diggers. To the men with rock axes he said, "hold it there a moment."

Sand splattered the humanoids whose carcasses and skeletons they had uncovered all over. Was this strange creature then, a master? Was this the dominant race after all? Another involuntary shudder worked its way across Robert's shoulders, found a line down his spine ending up in the pit of his stomach.

Robert had measured the sarcophagus when they first entered the room, but thought for its size, it also contained a wife or a queen. He thought about his findings some more.

Then Henry examined the statue more closely.

The red was like blood. He had never seen a ruby so red. He could not imagine the size this nugget had been before the carving had whittled it down. He was holding it upright in his hand, then realised it should be horizontal. The eyes on the alien were closed.

Robert was the first to hear it. Soft, like a sigh. A gentle swish.

Too late! He tried to shove something under the swiftly closing entrance, but the effigy crushed under the force. The entrance closed tight.

Another whisper caught his

"We're breaking through!" shouted Henry Jackson to the diggers. To the men with rock axes he said, "hold it there a moment."

Sand splattered as Henry pounded down the slope towards the too bright, white tent. His newly arrived half-brother was resting after the journey.

Henry clapped him on the shoulder to wake him. "We are almost through."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Robert rubbed his eyes, moving his head out of the sunlight that streamed into the tent.

"Well," Henry replied in a shirty manner, "it's your dig too. I thought you would want to be there."

Robert yawned. His jaw clicked as he opened his mouth too wide and stretched his lean sinewy arms high above his head. The brightness inside the tent made him squint. "I have been having second thoughts lately."

"Not that old chestnut," declared Henry. "Plenty have been opened since then. Has anything bad happened for a long time?" It was the old fear. First in, first out - feet first!

Getting up from the camp bed, Robert brushed out the creases in his rumpled shirt. Less than two hours! Not much sleep. Certainly not enough to rest him after that bone-shaking journey from base camp.

"Oh well, if you're not interested....."

"I suppose I will have to come. Lead on."

Henry trudged back up to the cliff where the men were resting, Robert wearily following. He gave the order and the men began the painstaking final breach. They brushed away dust as it fell. Fine silt that clogged eyes and nostrils. Robert quickly pulled a cloth from his pocket, swiftly covering vital areas.

"There's a crack now. Take care," came a muffled cry as Henry pushed through the face workers to examine the rock.

Waiting until the breeze had blown the dust away, he gently pulled the scarf from his jaw trying not to disturb the thick coating that clung to the weave. Then, taking his own pik, he struck, wedging it so that he could put pressure on to lever the crack wider.

After a few moments, the men were waived aside and he beckoned Robert to come closer. "Put your face by the crack," he ordered. His brother gave him a hard look but did as he asked. "Can you feel anything?"

Robert started to shake his head then held his hand up. "No! Wait a minute! It isn't just the breeze, I think I can feel a murmur."

"Out of the way," declared Henry. "Let me feel it."

Henry placed his cheek against the crack, daring to hope that it would be true. There it was. A whisper of something ice-cool caressing his skin. He sniffed, his nostrils hard up against the tiny pin-prick. It was

unmistakable! That smell of rankness, of air enclosed for centuries, gases formed from items placed as offerings that had decomposed. They all had it, that smell of ancient civilisation, the reek of heavy perfumed oils splattered over everything that had somehow lasted until, as now, someone came to disturb the dead.

"I am going to widen it now," declared Henry. "Make sure you're not in the path."

Robert nodded and moved to the left side. His hand burnt as he touched the sunlit quartz. Gloveless again! He was getting forgetful. This stuff burnt like hell in the mid-day heat.

Henry re-tied the scarf. He had no wish to ingest anything that escaped when he broke the seal. Holding the pik with his left hand, he felt for his hammer, raised his arm and drove the solid wedge home. It hit the pik squarely on the head. Henry jumped clear, heading to the right side. He landed badly and a sharp pain shot through his ankle. He hoped he had hit hard enough, he knew he would not be able to do it again.

His reward was the sight of a stream of thick oily gas escaping into the bright sunlight. He could see it against the clear sky. They waited interminable minutes for the last of the projections to cease. At last Henry felt that it had come to an end and moved towards the entrance.

"Hurt yourself?" inquired Robert.

"Jumped badly," stated Henry. "Might have broken it. Can you carry on? I have to splint this ankle, in case."

"You go. I'll break through. Come back when you are ready."

Robert watched two of the men make a chair and carry Henry down to the tent. Pity, he thought. He was so looking forward to being the first to enter. It would have been kudos for him. Robert on the other hand, had seen these before. He had been the first one ever to break in. How long ago was that now?

Testing the crack, he realised no more gas was escaping, just the stench. That could not be avoided. He began the task of widening the cracks in the seal. When, after some time, he had chipped his way around the seal, he let the men take over.

Robert moved away to rest, wiping the sweat from around the back

of his neck and all over his face. It was hard work. He had forgotten just how hard. The only reason he came back was because of the chance that it might contain a prize piece. He had hopes! Henry could have all the kudos, that didn't matter to Robert. The prize was all he was after. Not for itself. Not for the worth.

The huge tablet was wrested from the entrance just as a limping Henry was being helped back up to the tomb.

"I'll go first," stated Robert clicking on a bright hand-held shiner. "Mind that foot of yours."

"I don't think it's broken," whispered Henry as they started to descend the steps inside.

"Good," Robert muttered, stopping for a moment to play the shiner over the walls and roof. There were designs this short way in, he was sure they had found an important site. Lighting the steps once more, Robert moved further down into the first entrance hall. Henry had brought up an air cylinder and both now took deep draughts to top up their oxygen levels. The rankness had settled like mud at this level.

"Looks normal so far." Henry felt some of the incised designs as he held on to the stair wall for support. Robert shone the light around the chamber, searching for the trigger.

"There it is!" He spotted the design they sought and Robert walked over to the recessed pedestal.

"So far, so good," sighed Robert. "Are you ready?"

It was Henry's turn to nod and move aside. Robert placed his hand over the marks and pressed. Jumping clear, he joined Henry who turned on the cylinder and they both breathed from the rubber mask. A great hiss assaulted their ears and more of the putrid gas blew from this new opening. Henry wished he had the foresight to bring two cylinders. He didn't expect the one they carried to last at this rate. When the air cleared as much as it was going to, they moved further into the obelisk. The first one ever that Robert had broached, laid down a blueprint for all the others. That made this break-in easy, once inside the outer compartment.

The gas was low, but they found the final chamber at last. All the way along, the paintings, the decoration, the statues became more prolific. Now, in the burial chamber, this one far surpassed any that

Robert had seen before.

The gas was worse here as the bodies of worshipers and servants were hunched up on every available seat. Desiccated, of course. These had been alive when the tomb was sealed whereas, in most of the others, they were dead and wrapped. Made the find all the more important in Robert's eyes.

Robert never quite got over the eeriness in the centre of the tomb. It felt like someone was willing him to stay, whenever he tried to leave. Only one thing changed that feeling. Now he started his search.

Henry sat on the floor to rest his ankle. The plaster, meant for transportation of some of the minor statues or small findings they wanted to remove, had been put on his ankle in case there was a break. But the ankle throbbed just the same. He suddenly needed air and gasped at the last puff from the cylinder.

Robert searched in the usual places and came up empty-handed. He played the shiner over every corner of the room, not recognising the paintings here. No wonder he couldn't find it. Oh, he could read the directives. He had studied them now for some time, they said the same as always, but these pictures? Ignoring a shudder that suddenly touched his spine like an icy hand, he continued his search. Even practical men have their Achilles heel. The feeling that he was a thief never quite went out of his mind though he could not think why. Dead and buried for aeons and none to ask for redress.

He turned to the stone that should hold the dead one, feeling its smoothness, searching for an indentation, a crack. At last, his searching fingers found a slight depression. Going on instinct, he pushed hard.

A grating sound, slight at first, alerted his ears. Stepping back, he looked for the opening. He found it on the far side.

Gingerly feeling inside the opening, his fingers touched its soft glassy surface. Gently grasping the object, he withdrew it slowly, savouring the growing excitement.

"I've found it Henry. And it is a big one."

"Let's have a look."

Robert brought the statue over to where Henry was sitting, covered in the silt that littered the floor. He held the light behind the statue. The



light pulsed red, deep red.

"This one," said Robert, "is a ruby, a blood red ruby". There was awe in his voice as he almost jealously caressed the icy cold gem, felt its shape so lovingly crafted.

"That's the first ruby you've found, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, but just look at the size of it. Enormous, compared with all the others." Robert fondled the piece, caressing every cut, every line. No! It wasn't for what he could sell it for. He just wanted it for its beauty, its craftsmanship. When he held one of these, it was as if it were talking to him, wishing him to stay. But then he took a good look at its shape.

He turned to Henry. "Look at it! It's the same as those wall paintings over there. Not like the others at all."

Henry studied the statue in the dimming light from the shiner, then compared it with the drawings on the wall. "You are right. I don't like the feeling I am getting!"

Robert also gave the statue an even closer look. It wasn't humanoid like the others. The ruby statue was carved in the shape of a two-legged reptile with wings that hugged its shoulders. He was reminded of those flying foxes enclosed within their leathery wings and hanging, just hanging but without the fur and the gentle face. Definitely reptilian! At its knee were carved two of ar. He ran for the cylinder. Found it empty. In his panic, he grabbed at his brother. Henry slid into a foetal position, his breathing regular.

Now Robert smelt the gas.

Retrieving the fallen ruby statue, he held it close to his chest, stroking the strangely warming curio.

He never heard the grating of the opening sarcophagus.

He never saw the wakening creature, restored and hungry after an elongated hibernation period.

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